THE ORIGIN OF THE RECENTLY DISCOVERED "APOCRYPHON JACOBI" [1]

BY

W. C. VAN UNNIK

The origin and early growth of Christianity in Egypt are still wrapped in darkness. It is most remarkable, that neither that invaluable source of information, the Acts of the Apostles, nor the N.T. in general yields any positive evidence which can be connected with certainty with Egypt. This is the more striking since this country is so near to Palestine and offered a place of residence to large Jewish colonies. This unfortunate situation does not change for the greater part of the second century. Thirty years ago von Harnack had to confess: „Die empfindlichste Lücke in unserem Wissen von der ältesten Kirchengeschichte ist unsere fast vollständige Unkenntnis der Geschichte des Christentums in Alexandrien und Aegypten ... bis zum Jahre c. 180 (Episkopat des Demetrius). Erst für diese Zeit tritt für uns die alexandrinische Kirche in das Licht der Geschichte". [2] Some names of apocryphal gospels like the Gospel according to the Hebrews and according to the Egyptians are known; the famous gnostic leaders Basilides and Valentinus lived there; some evidence of the existence of Christianity is offered by papyri, though the survey of H. I. Bell in 1944 [3] did not show a rich harvest for the period which interests us at the moment. The question whether "Barnabas" was written in Egypt is still open and the suggestion of a few scholars that 2 Clement had his home on the borders of the Nile was not favourably received [4]. Eusebius was ill-informed about that time and the great Alexandrians who were so much nearer are practically

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[1] Short communication, read at "the viii[th] International Congress for the History of Religions", Rome 17–23 April 1955.

[2] A. von Harnack, *Die Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten.* Leipzig (1923) Bd. II, S. 706–707.

[3] H. I. Bell, Evidences of Christianity in Egypt during the Roman Period. *Harvard Theological Review*, xxxvii (1944) p. 185–208.

[4] Cf. J. Quasten, *Patrology.* Utrecht–Brussels (1951) vol. i, p. 54 and 89.

silent. According to Walter Bauer in his "Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei" this was on purpose: "bis tief ins 2. Jahrhundert ist das Christentum hier ausgesprochen unorthodox" [1]. This contention has lately been challenged by Prof. Turner in "The pattern of Christian Truth" who while conceding that "the full pattern of orthodoxy develop(ed) somewhat late", holds that "a certain shading off into heresy" exists only on "the outer-fringes of Churchlife" [2]. I wish we could speak about this matter with so much certainty, but in my opinion the scanty survivals of Egyptian Christendom, often even of extremely doubtful interpretation and setting, do not allow a decision either way.

Especially because of the great part Egypt played in the development of Christian Gnosticism in the prime both of the heretical schools of Basilides and Valentinus and of the ecclesiastical writers like Clement and Origen, it is deeply to be regretted that up till now so little evidence is available. But it may be that one day or another, perhaps in the near future, that inexhaustible store-house Egypt will suddenly provide the materials to solve the present riddle. I do not dare to say that this happy day has dawned yet, but we may be thankful that something more has become available in recent years. And though it does not offer historical data which can only fully clear the matter and though in many respects the number of puzzles has increased, it should be borne in mind that every new piece of evidence is highly valuable, because in one way or another it covers a blank space of the immense jig-saw puzzle, and therefore requires careful examination.

Since Prof. H. C. Puech will fully discuss the importance of the library of a Gnostic sect, discovered in 1945 at Nag-Hammadi and especially of the "Codex Jung" which formed part of it, it is superfluous for me to dwell upon this theme. Instead of showing the more general aspects of the subject which may better be left to so competent a scholar as Prof. Puech, I propose to pay somewhat closer attention to one particular point, viz. the hitherto unknown apocryphal writing attributed to James which forms the first part

[1] W. Bauer, *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum*. Tübingen (1934) S. 63.

[2] H. E. W. Turner, *The Pattern of Christian Truth*. London (1954) p. 59.

of "Codex Jung" the only one of the group which is accessible at present thanks to the work of my colleague Dr. Quispel.

Since this "Apocryphon Jacobi" belongs to a manuscript with material from genuine gnostic sources, the presumption that it has the same origin, viz. in the school of Valentinus, does not seem too hazardous. It is, as I pointed out in my study: "The Gospel of Truth and the N.T.",[1] beyond reasonable doubt that the second treatise is the *Evangelium Veritatis* of the great gnostic doctor mentioned by Irenaeus, and the great part of the fourth treatise, called by the editors: "On the three natures" shows so many affinities with the teaching of Heracleon, the pupil of Valentinus that there is a good case to be made out for its deriving from the same school. But is this presumption right for the first part? It is interesting to notice that Puech and Quispel in their first detailed report [2] assign this "Apocryphon Jacobi" to a gnostic author only with great hesitation. This raises an important question with regard to the character of Egyptian Christianity mentioned before.

Granted that the distinction between "Church and Gnosis" in the early part and middle of the second century cannot be too well defined it may be asked whether this document – if it is old – shows definite marks of Gnosticism or not; what is its character and affinities? And though I admit that many phrases in this Apocryphon are even harder to understand than the letters of our beloved brother Paul (cf. 2 Pet. 3:16), it is possible, I think, to attain a fairly sound result in the main point at issue.

The train of thought in this apocryphon is not quite as clear as we should wish. The contents may be summarized in this way. After a short introduction in which the author says that he James and Peter are called by the Lord 550 days after His resurrection for a special instruction he discusses two points viz. behaviour towards persecution and the possibility of prophecy (p. 1–6). After that the Lord admonishes them to be attentive to His words, in order to come into the kingdom of heaven. He has come down in

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[1] H. C. Puech, G. Quispel, W. C. van Unnik, *The Jung Codex*. London (1955) p. 81–129.

[2] H. C. Puech, G. Quispel, Les écrits gnostiques du codex Jung. *Vigiliae Christianae*, viii (1954) p. 7–22.

order that they may dwell with Him. He has plainly explained to them the parables, but in many ways his disciples are still without understanding. Therefore there is a variety of feelings, now there is joy, now there is sorrow. Jesus says good-bye to his disciples and will go away, but he urges them to save themselves. The end describes the ascension in a peculiar way: Jesus goes on high in a chariot of pneuma; the two disciples follow him through two heavens, but in the last one they cannot enter. They return to their fellows to tell them the Lord's message and when they are embittered James sends them away to their work, while he himself goes to Jerusalem. The main part is an urgent appeal to seek salvation and to follow Jesus to the kingdom of God.

Is this a gnostic piece of work? It does not seem very probable. Puech–Quispel give several reasons,[1] none of which seems valid to me, as a brief discussion will bring to light. This can best be done by mentioning their arguments, and expressing my objections in the following points:

1) It is possible to give it a gnostic interpretation, but that cannot be called very stringent; the same can be said of various books in the Bible; besides that: possibility is not the same as necessity.

2) The use of gnostic terms like "election" and "gnosis"; but these are also to be found in the N.T. and before this can be adduced as an argument, one should be sure that they are used here in a typically gnostic manner.

3) Whether special revelation to some of the disciples is specifically gnostic, seems doubtful; an interesting quotation of Irenaeus I 30,14 may have some outward similarity to our writing; if however the whole passage is read, it becomes clear that there is no connection in contents at all; if these gnostics have known a writing like our apocryphon they have adapted it to their own ideas in the same way as they did with the N.T.

4) 18 months as post-resurrection period; it is true that these numbers are found in gnostic circles; but as von Harnack pointed

[1] H. C. Puech, G. Quispel, *art. cit.*, p. 20–22.

out [1] this number itself must be pre-gnostic, since they play on it like on the numbers in the N.T.

5) A certain similarity between the last lines in this work and the *Evangelium Veritatis;* but the *tertium comparationis* being the idea of the children of God, we find a general christian and not a typically gnostic thought.

If this writing is compared with original gnostic books such as the Valentinian "Gospel of Truth", the Pistis Sophia, the Books of Jeû or the *Excerpta e Theodoto*, its non-gnostic character appears the more clearly. All typically gnostic ideas like aeons, the unknown Father, the sin as *ἄγνοια*, the great series of mysteries with their special names, the division between Jesus and Christ, the different classes of men are all missing. Salvation is deliverance from sin in the *ἐπιθυμία* and not in the flesh itself; the kingdom of God is in heaven, but we do not hear of special initiations to pass to it; to believe in the cross of Jesus is sufficient. These gnostic books which give an answer to the questions "from where we are and where we go" (Exc. e Theod. 78) are totally different in their outlook.

Because the reasons brought forward with hesitation by Puech–Quispel do not seem valid to me and there is such a difference with works of undisputed gnostic origin, it seems to me that we must look for another circle in which the *Apoc. Jac.* was made.

Who is the James, the author uses as his mouth-piece? He does not give any clear indication, for the fact that he refers to another writing of his, sent 10 months before, does not offer any help up till now. Since the Nag-Hammadi-collection contains several other books under the same name it may be that a link between one of them and this piece will be found in the future. Up till now, however, there is no definite indication. The references to James in "Pistis Sophia" e.g. do not show the slightest similarity. One might suggest James the brother of the Lord, to whom various apocryphal works have been ascribed and who is mentioned by Clement of Alexandria, together with Peter and John as a

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[1] A. Harnack, *Chronologische Berechnung des „Tages von Damaskus"*. Sitzungsberichte der preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin (1912) S. 677–678.

recipient of special instruction by the Lord [1]. But it should be observed that there is no interest in Jewish matters either positive or negative in this writing. Of any special connection with Jesus there is no trace. So it is equally possible that James, the son of Zebedee, was meant, he belonging with Peter and his brother to the inner circle of Jesus' Disciples according to the Gospels and being honoured with the vision of the Transfiguration and Gethsemane. Here, too, we come to a negative statement: our apocryphon does not contain links with Palestine. There are no signs of special anti-Jewish tendencies, such as in the Epistle of Barnabas; further, even quotations or clear references to the O.T. are lacking.

In spite of diligent searching in the early Christian literature it has not yet been possible to bring this writing into one of the well-known streams of thought. Ascetic tendencies are not found here as in the Gospel of the Egyptians. Perhaps there is a connection with one agraphon when it is said twice: "save yourself", which reminds us of *σῴζου σὺ καὶ ἡ ψυχή σου* (Exc. e Theod. 2), but one cannot say that this is either clear or very helpful.

Two writings however may be mentioned, because of some interesting points of agreement:

1) *2nd Clement:* there are two central ideas in this sermon which occur also as leading themes in this apocryphon, viz. *a*) the entrance in the kingdom of heaven and the conditions to enter therein; *b*) the stress on salvation – Besides that some minor points may be observed, such as: *ἐλεήθητε* (p.2) = 2 Cl. 1:7 *ἠλέησεν γὰρ ἡμᾶς καὶ σπλαγχνισθεὶς ἔσωσε*; the comparison of Christian life with a sojourning in a foreign country; the express thought that life is short and that therefore Life must be sought for. If this is right, it would strengthen the case for the origin of this sermon (2nd Clement) in Egypt and explain its curious apocryphal quotations, one of which is from the Gospel according to the Egyptians! On the other hand there are together with this fundamental agreement marked differences: the "ecclesiastical" element, references to baptism, presbyters, is lacking here; even more striking is that A. Jac. is completely uneschatological; the urgent appeal to *μετανοία* because of the coming judgement is completely missing.

[1] See the references in Puech, Quispel, *art. cit.*, p. 10, note 16.

This apocryphon stands as far as I can see alone in this respect.

2) The *Ascension of Isaiah:* this curious writing with its typically Christian interpolation is dated by most authors between 80–100 A.D., but is generally treated in a very neglectful way. It has in common with A. Jac.: *a*) the number of post-resurrection days 545–550; the accompanying circumstances of the Ascension; an expression like: "those who believe in my cross", and the idea that the righteous ones will become like Jesus. One cannot say, however, that one writing depends upon the other: the whole scenery and teaching is different and whereas Asc. Is. has 7 heavens, there are only three here. But even this independence makes the parallels more striking; a similar tradition is behind both.

As far as the N.T. is concerned it must be said that the Book of Acts, the only one that gives an account of the ascension is unknown. This appears from its description and the conflict of dates: 40 days against 550, though it must be said that when Acts says that Jesus spoke to His disciples *τὰ περὶ τῆς βασιλείας τοῦ θεοῦ* this definition can be applied to this apocryphon. The letters of Paul yield only one really striking parallelism: p. 13 I have given myself under the curse – Gal. 3:13 *γενόμενος ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν κατάρα*; besides that the admonition to watchfulness and against drunkenness is found, but it is too common to be of much use. Most clear of all is the fact that material now collected in the gospels is known. There are references to a number of parables, because the time Jesus is with His disciples after His resurrection seems to explain their meaning now He speaks no more in parables (cf. Joh. 16 : 25) He goes away and has come down (cf. John) The disciples boast that they have left their parents etc. Unfortunately it is impossible to say whether the author possessed one or more of our present gospels. From the well-known Papyrus Egerton 2 it is known in what a state of mixture these texts were current.

The Christology of this apocryphon has nothing "unorthodox" – Jesus came down, taught his disciples about the kingdom, was crucified and under the curse, he suffered, was raised and goes to heaven. His disciples are called to follow him, having received the Spirit as a gift from heaven. There is nothing of docetism.

Because of that number 550 the text must have been written before Acts became generally known; that is in the former half of

the 2nd century. Because it does not contain references to the Jews or to the O.T., it may be that the author lived after the Jewish rebellion in 135 with its massacres in Egypt or that he lived in a small village in the country. This latter supposition would explain why this writing did not come to the knowledge of Clement of Alexandria. Its author had surely a literary gift as may be seen even through the veil of translation from a comparison like this: "For the World is like a grain of seed (Matth. 13:1); when a man has seen it, he believes in it and when it sprouts, he loves it seeing many grains in it instead of one and working he is saved because he prepares it for food," in this way he explains that the Word is the origin of faith, love and works. The book is written in a time while there was no real persecution yet, but a growing tendency towards it, making the heart of the believers faint.

In combining these facts I would like to suggest that this newly discovered apocryphon originates from a small village-church not yet affected by gnosticism, between 125–150 as a word of exhortation to seek the way to the kingdom by salvation as Jesus gave it. Because it was not very concrete in its wording it became out-of-date and got lost. Because it could be interpreted in a gnostic way these circles took hold of it, since it gave some "revelation" outside that used in the church. But it should be borne in mind that in that time Christian theology was still in a very fluid state and that it is preferable to distinguish between what is real gnosticism and a vague, unreflected Christianity.

In formulating these conclusions I am fully aware that much in it is tentative though some facts are certain. As it is we have here a most interesting new document of Egyptian Christianity from a most obscure period, from a country so interesting in the religious life of the Roman Empire. Perhaps even these tentative conclusions may help to define more clearly the real problem of the relation between Gnosis and Christianity.

Bilthoven, Sweelincklaan 4.